

DURHAM — From across the nation to across the campus, the loss of Bill Friday was acutely felt.

Flowers encircled the Old Well on the UNC Chapel Hill campus in memory of the former University of North Carolina leader who died Friday. Tributes poured in both from those who knew the state's most famous educator for decades and those who only knew the name.

Nearly every major political figure in the state — both past and present — extolled the man who led the UNC system for 30 years.

Gov. Beverly Perdue called Mr. Friday "a renaissance man, a phenomenal educational and human service leader, a marvelous husband and daddy, and my friend."

She added that Mr. Friday's dedication and service to North Carolina and monumental impact on the state could not be overstated. "There has been no person in North Carolina's history who more fully exemplified how one individual can, year after year, make a tremendous difference," Perdue said.

One of her predecessors, former Gov. Jim Hunt, said that "Bill Friday embodied all that is good about North Carolina: kindness, modesty, integrity, diligence, curiosity, friendliness, faith in education, a sincere concern for every person whatever their station in life and, behind his mild demeanor, a fierce determination to make our state all that it can be and should be."

Mr. Friday's spirit, Hunt added, "will live on in the University of North Carolina system. He was a product of it. He built it. He loved it. It will be his eternal monument."

The state's two U.S. senators also offered encomiums.

Sen. Kay Hagan called Mr. Friday "one of our greatest leaders and advocates."

He "helped shape North Carolina into the 21st century economic engine it is today," she said. "He grew the University of North Carolina system into the best higher education system in the country. He helped make Research Triangle Park a world-renowned center for innovation and entrepreneurship. And he advocated tirelessly to ensure that a college education was within reach for all North Carolina students."

Sen. Richard Burr called Mr. Friday "a leader, a visionary, a role model, and a friend." His legacy, he added, "will endure for generations."

The Congressman from Mr. Friday's district, David Price, called Mr. Friday a "North Carolina treasure."

"He led by inspiration and example — with dignity, compassion and humility —through over five decades of public service," Price noted. "His legacy is a stronger state with a superb university system, a richer public life, a more vibrant culture and a diverse and resilient economy. Bill was instrumental in giving the gift of education to hundreds of thousands of North Carolinians."

Praise also poured in from the world of education, including those who succeeded Mr. Friday as head of the UNC system.

"Bill Friday lived a life that exemplified everything that has made our university — and the state of North Carolina — great," UNC President Tom Ross said in a statement. "He was a man of unquestioned honor and integrity who devoted a lifetime of extraordinary leadership and service to the university and state he loved so much."

Erskine Bowles, who preceded Ross as president of UNC, said Mr. Friday's impact on the university system, the state and the nation was staggering.

"For me, the University of North Carolina will always be Bill Friday's University," Bowles said. "He quite literally poured the foundation for it, and then over a distinguished tenure that spanned 30 years, he helped build our public university system into the extraordinary economic and cultural engine it is for today."

Bowles said Mr. Friday's advice and counsel and unconditional support during his tenure as UNC system president was invaluable.

"Bill Friday was my hero, my mentor, and my friend," Bowles said.

Molly Broad, who led the university system before Bowles and is now the president of the American Council on Education, called the loss of Bill Friday "a personal one for me, and for every North Carolinian who had the good fortune to be touched in some way by the remarkable institution of higher education he built."

His fingerprints, she added, "are visible on so many organizations that have made North Carolina a better place to live, study and work. Beyond the borders of our state, President Friday looms large over American higher education and will long be remembered as a champion for the life-changing potential of education."

Mr. Friday was also, she added, "our favorite grandfather, sharing freely his sage advice and great personal warmth."

Mr. Friday also was prominent in the movement to reform college sports. He helped found the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics and the leaders of the organization also lauded his impact.

In a statement, the organization said, "The positive and lasting impact Bill Friday had on higher education and college sports in particular cannot be overstated. ... he provided the moral compass for the Knight Commission and higher education on the subjects of presidential leadership, academic and financial integrity."

The co-chair of the commission, William Kirwan, chancellor of the University System of Maryland, said "generations of college administrators, faculty, students and athletes will be better off for Bill Friday's vision of what college sports can be at its best."

Many who had never known Mr. Friday during his university presidency knew him instead from his weekly public television program, "North Carolina People."

Rob Teer, the chair of UNC television's Board of Trustees, said Mr. Friday was one of the founders of the statewide television system and the program — which was scheduled to begin its 42nd season this fall — "touched everybody in the state."

"He was a great man, a great man in North Carolina," Teer said. "He was one of the top 10 people in the history of North Carolina."

Almost all undergraduate students on the UNC campus were born after Mr. Friday retired from the presidency and, on Friday, few even knew his name.

But those who did recalled a significant figure.

"I know the Friday Center was named for him," said UNC student Logan Savage. "And I know that he was really well-liked."